

Refuse ground war with Islamic State

A. Trevor Thrall and Erik Goepner

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Conservative calls for more muscular intervention to destroy Islamic State have grown louder and will only grow more frequent as the 2016 campaign heats up. Although the American public has identified the Islamic militant group as a critical threat and wants something done, another U.S. ground war is the wrong answer. War is unnecessary and would be disastrously costly and counterproductive.

The most common argument made by hawks for U.S. engagement is to prevent future Islamic State-sponsored terrorism against the U.S. homeland. Our track record on homeland security since 9/11, however, reveals that a ground war is unnecessary. In the 13 years before 9/11, Islamist-inspired groups launched five attacks on U.S. soil. In the same period since 9/11, just four attacks have been carried out in the U.S. despite the rapid rise in Islamist mobilization and growth in global terrorism. From 2000 to 2013, the number of Islamic-inspired terrorist groups on the [State Department's list](#) of Foreign Terrorist Organizations spiked 185 percent, while the estimated number of Islamist fighters rose 243 percent. Clearly, the United States' success at limiting attacks on its homeland has come not from destroying terrorist groups abroad, but through improved intelligence and other homeland security-focused efforts.

Others have called for war to stabilize the Middle East or to further various American interests in the region. Central to this strategy is the ability to defeat Islamic State and create more favorable conditions on the ground than exist today. On this score, however, history speaks loudly against the hawks.

First, the track record of great nations projecting power to put down highly motivated insurgencies is an ugly one. The Vietnam War, despite obvious differences, presented a very analogous situation in which the U.S. faced a local movement able to sustain brutal losses and still outlast the U.S. thanks to its superior commitment, its home field advantage, and to the fact that the U.S. was simply not willing to suffer enough casualties or spend enough international political capital to achieve victory.

Moreover, the hawks are out of step with the military's lessons learned from the last 14 years of fighting insurgents. Former commanders from both Afghanistan and Iraq have argued "[we can't kill our way out of this.](#)" General McChrystal, a former commander of U.S. Joint Special Operations Command, cautioned that killing insurgents can produce counterintuitive results. The

most evolved military thinking on the situation at present suggests the U.S. should adopt a less visible strategy, one of indirect confrontation, working through allies in the region.

Even worse, in its zeal the pro-war camp has conveniently forgotten the most difficult phase of such a war: the aftermath. This memory lapse allows hawks to ignore the terrible fact that Islamic State owes its very existence to the chaotic aftermath of the 2003 war. There was no Islamic State when the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003. Their formation and expansion was made possible because the United States provided wildly effective ammunition to entrepreneurial ideologues.

Finally, the hawks have also glossed over the inevitable costs of more war.

The U.S. should work to help its allies in the region to find a strategy that will produce a more permanent solution than airstrikes or another costly and counterproductive U.S.-led ground war.

A. Trevor Thrall is associate professor at the School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs at George Mason University.

Erik Goepner is retired from the Air Force, having commanded units in Iraq and Afghanistan.